

AN INQUIRY
INTO THE
PROGRESS AND CONDITION
OF
MECHANICS' AND LITERARY
INSTITUTIONS;

Part II.

A PAPER READ BEFORE THE
DUBLIN STATISTICAL SOCIETY,

ON MONDAY, JUNE 21st, 1852.

BY T. E. CLIFFE LESLIE, LL. B.

BARRISTER-AT-LAW.

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THIS society was established in November, 1847, for the purpose of promoting the study of Statistical and Economical Science. The meetings are held on the third Monday in each month, from November till June, inclusive, at 8, p. m. The business is transacted by members reading written communications on subjects of Statistical and Economical Science. No communication is read unless two members of the council certify that they consider it in accordance with the rules and objects of the society. The reading of each paper, unless by express permission of the council previously obtained, is limited to *half an hour*.

Applications for leave to read papers should be made to the secretaries at least a *week* previously to the meeting.

Proposals of candidate members should be sent to the secretaries at least a *fortnight* previously to the meeting.

The subscription to the society is one pound entrance, and *ten shillings* per annum.

An Inquiry into the Progress and Condition of Mechanics' and Literary Institutions, Part II.—By T. E. CLIFFE LESLIE, LL.B. Barrister-at-Law.

GENTLEMEN,

It was shown in a former paper,* that Mechanics' Institutions are not generally supported by that class of the community for whose advantage they were originally designed; and that they are, in fact, associations of members of every grade of the middle class, with a proportion of operatives by no means sufficient to render the name which the Institutions bear at all appropriate. The evidence connected with this fact led me to recommend the extension of the "Public Libraries Act" to Ireland and Scotland, and to small towns, with some additional provisions. Whether such a proposition is sound in principle, or available in practice, is not now the question submitted to your judgment; I allude to it only for the sake of observing, that the subject to which I now request attention is entirely distinct, and in its consideration there will be no occasion to go outside the principle of voluntary association, and call in a rate in aid.

The former paper advocated the establishment of Institutions of a class which does not exist; the present treats of a class which not only exists, but is a very remarkable feature of the age. The facts connected with the inquiry must be interesting to a statistical society, as being indicative of the direction and degree of social progress; but the amount of immediate interest which the subject may elicit is a matter of minor importance, compared with the public advantage which may arise from directing to it the judgment and experience of a society so constituted as this, and which is every day becoming more influential. For Mechanics' and Literary Institutions not only afford, by their condition and progress, important evidence of the character and spirit of the nation and the epoch; but are, in the natural connection of cause and effect, powerful agents in the formation of that character and spirit. And although the immutable laws which govern the course of civilization are beyond your control, you may exercise a salutary influence over the means which are mediate between first causes and final results.

In laying before you the principal general facts presented by a review of the Institutions, there will be some convenience in taking separately the three countries of the United Kingdom.

There have been three epochs in the history of these Institutions in England, at each of which a number of new ones have started into existence, and a great deal of public attention has been drawn to their general condition. The periods to which I refer, are the beginning of the present century; from 1823 to 1827; and the last three years up to the present time. The two quarters of a century

* Read before the Dublin Statistical Society on the 16th of February, 1852.

which these periods embrace have not only ushered into life many hundreds of Institutes, but have consigned a vast number to dissolution and oblivion. It should be observed, that Mechanics' Institutions, Athenæums, and Literary Societies are, for the most part, names for associations of the same character, composition, and objects; with this distinction, that Mechanics' Institutions were originally established for the special use of the operative classes, while Literary Institutions have generally been formed from the first by the association of members of the classes which continue to support them. When we come to the Irish Institutes and Societies, another distinction will be noticed as incident to their commencement, but disappearing with their growth and development.

Grouping together, therefore, Mechanics' Institutes, Athenæums and Literary Institutions, it would appear that there were in 1851 about 600 such establishments in England, with upwards of 100,000 members. The same general description is applicable to the Institutions of large and of small towns, and the nature and success of their arrangements may be exhibited under a few heads. The first Institutes having been established by patronage, *patrons* were naturally their first managers; and, under their organization, the provisions embraced a library, reading-room, scientific lectures, evening instruction classes, a museum of models and specimens, and an experimental workshop and laboratory. Scientific adult education was the object of the founders; or if the arrangements could be said to embrace recreation, it was of a very rigid and philosophical nature. The patronage principle, however, failed, and the management, membership and character of the Institutions underwent a change. When operatives ceased to attend and patrons to support, the classes who really both attended and supported them began to assume their direction, and to choose their committees and officers from among the general members. To the reading-room was added that species of literature which a news-room is known to contain, and which had previously been regarded as objectionable, and meriting the somewhat indefinite reproach of being "ephemeral;" and the admission of musical and dramatic entertainments, with other amusements, evinced that the members did not conceive themselves bound to devote all their co-operative resources and leisure hours to the sole purpose of education. Nor has alteration in the character of the Institutions been only in the form of addition to the provisions of the original scheme, but also in the discontinuance or neglect of some of those provisions. The absolute failure of museums and work-shops to engage any interest or attention, the abandonment of classes for instruction on various subjects in numerous Institutes, and the limited success of strictly scientific lectures, are plain indications to the new associations which are continually filling the vacant places of old and bankrupt ones, that these are not the first departments to be attended to, if they wish to become popular and permanent. They have before them ample statistical and practical demonstration, that financial inanition is the result of

expending their resources upon objects which have no marketable value, whatever may be their philosophic worth;—that lectures, to become popular and to pay, must be accommodated to the popular understanding and taste;—that museums and workshops are generally found to waste both room and capital,—and that a library and news-room are invariably the staple attractions, while occasional amusements are necessary to engage large and permanent support. To this should be added that in the English Institutes, as in other well known instances, periodical exhibitions of arts and manufacture attest, by the uniform profit they ensure, the national taste for exact and tangible representations of industrial and artistic progress; and that chemical classes, and, in large towns, classes for drawing, modelling, and designing (when the Government Schools of Design have not interfered) have been steadily supported.

If success be an object, it surely is important to observe every indication of the probable means of attaining it; when we are informed that in 1851 the financial resources and the number of members had declined in almost every English Institute; and that, while every year exhibits by its new Institutions the activity of the principle of association, an annual list of suspensions and failures is indisputable evidence of defective internal arrangements, or powerful external impediments.

This brief summary of the character and condition of the English Institutes would be incomplete, without some account of a very important development of the system, under the title of “Unions of Mechanics’ and Literary Institutions.” The first Union was established in the West Riding of Yorkshire in 1838, for the purpose of employing a portion of the resources of the associate Institutions in the engagement of able lecturers, and the interchange of opinion and advice as to local management. It was also in contemplation to publish a monthly Union periodical, and to establish a permanent Union lecturership on the physical sciences; and, although these latter purposes were not carried into execution, the success of the Yorkshire Union is plain from the fact, that a year and a half ago it represented 109 Institutions with 18,500 members and 83,000 volumes. There are several other Unions in England, and, from a review of their general results, it appears that little has been done in the way of actual engagement of lecturers; but that a great deal of reciprocal advantage has been obtained from the interchange of books and manuscript lectures; and of advice and information with respect to local management, and the best means of procuring lecturers and getting up exhibitions and soirees. Unions have also, as might be expected, promoted the establishment of new Institutions.

In Scotland it appears that there were, in 1851, 55 Institutes, with 12,554 members, 59,661 volumes, and 15 news-rooms. The first of these* was founded at Edinburgh in 1821, for the express object of

* The Edinburgh School of Arts.

affording instruction to the labouring classes; and is, as Dr. Hudson remarks, in his *History of Adult Education*, "the only establishment in Great Britain deserving the name of a People's College, having for 28 years continued to supply to one class of society in the Scotch capital the training which the University has to another." The original character of this Institution was strictly and exclusively scientific; but latterly it has been found necessary to vary and extend the course of instruction; for example, by forming classes in music and modern languages. One particular feature of this establishment has been its success in drawing, ornamental modelling, and architectural designing; and several eminent sculptors and architects have been educated in its classes. For the last two years, however, the Institution has been languishing, apparently under mismanagement.

The principal impediments to the success of Mechanics' Institutions in Scotland appear to be three, viz. the disunion occasioned by sectarian prejudices; the rigid observance, to a great extent, of the original scheme of providing only for education in its most limited sense, to the exclusion not only of amusements, but frequently even of newspapers; and, thirdly, the general practice of entirely closing the Institutes during the summer and autumn months. An instance of the operation of the first of these impediments is mentioned in Dr. Hudson's work already referred to; namely that, a few years since, a prosperous Mechanics' Institute in Edinburgh suddenly failed, in consequence of a dispute about the admissibility of a historical lecture from a Unitarian preacher. It may be remarked that female members are generally admissible in the Scotch Institutes; but this attraction, if it be one, is not found to countervail the influence of the causes which obstruct their prosperity.

Dr. Hudson's *History of Adult Education*, which is a work of considerable merit, has been one of my principal sources of information with regard to Mechanics' and Literary Institutions in England and Scotland. Upon their condition, Dr. Hudson may be regarded as very good authority; as, independently of the industry with which he has collected information, he has had large official experience in connection with the Institutions in both countries. But, I am happy to say, I have not found him to be a good authority in regard to Ireland.

To the Institutions of this island he devotes one of the two hundred and thirty-eight pages which his volume contains, and his description is as unsatisfactory as it is concise: "Mechanics' institutions," he says, "have never prospered in Ireland for any lengthened period; and the literary and philosophical societies present the same state of inactivity and uselessness that characterises similar Institutions in Great Britain." The total number of Institutes and societies in Ireland he states to be twenty-five.

Before giving my reasons for disputing the accuracy of this account, I may observe that in Ireland Mechanics' Institutions and Literary Societies in their full development exhibit so close a resemblance, both as to their arrangements and the classes by which

they are supported, that they may be considered and treated of together by the social inquirer. Literary Societies have indeed in Ireland generally commenced with periodical meetings in a hired room, for the purpose of reading and discussing papers on scientific and literary subjects, with occasional lectures by strangers. But, with the growth of the Societies, the characteristics of the mature Mechanics' Institution uniformly develop themselves. The library, permanent reading-room, and, gradually, a separate building, give the element of fixity which is at first wanting in the Literary Society; and the periodical meetings closely assimilate themselves to features which most Mechanics' Institutions exhibit. To return to the consideration of the accuracy of Dr. Hudson's description, I may observe that in the very collection of information as to the condition of the Irish Institutes and Societies, I have been afforded an indication, not of the "same inactivity and uselessness" which are complained of in England, but of a degree of active intelligence which appears in very favourable contrast with the evidence of a gentleman much connected with Mechanics' Institutions, given before a select Committee of the House of Commons in 1849. He stated that there was "much difficulty in obtaining information at all as to the Mechanics' Institutions in England; the secretaries are not paid for what they do, and are therefore very lethargic about answering questions; and more than half his information, which it had taken him three years to collect, had been derived from personal visits." Within three weeks, and without one personal visit, I have readily collected a great deal of statistical and general information through the courtesy of the Irish secretaries, although they are "not paid for what they do;" and their replies to my inquiries evince as much intelligence as promptitude, although some of them are persons in a very humble rank of life. In most of the few cases in which my questions have not been answered, it has been explained that there were unavoidable obstacles to furnishing immediate information. Out of thirty-five Irish Institutes and Societies which have come under my notice, and of which five are in Belfast and three in Dublin, direct and particular information has been supplied to me with regard to twenty-seven. I have reason to believe that the entire number of associations considerably exceeds thirty-five, although I have not been furnished with the names of more; but a short statement of the principal facts I have actually been able to ascertain, will be a sufficient answer to Dr. Hudson's statement.

Of the twenty-seven associations which I am enabled to specify, only four existed prior to 1840, and thirteen have come into existence since the commencement of 1848. The reports also show that thirteen, or nearly half, are in a promising and progressive condition; ten are in a stationary or slightly improving condition; and four only are retrograde and declining. Their general arrangements may be described as follows:—

- 23 have periodical lectures ;
- 20 have libraries ;
- 8 have news-rooms ;
- 5 have regular classes ;
- 3 are open at certain hours on Sunday ;
- 4 admit what may be called amusements ; and
- 7 have already, or in course of construction, separate buildings.

Periodical Soirées are general, and are always found to be useful ; and papers by the members are read from time to time in several, and attract much interest. But classes have been discontinued in many establishments, and in very few are steadily kept up. Their attention does not appear to have been turned to the advantage of exhibitions. Among other indications of the impolicy of this omission, one appears to be afforded by the success of a custom observed by one admirable and flourishing Institution, the Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society. The secretary informs me that "it is customary every year at Easter to open the Museum at a small charge to the working classes ; and it is most gratifying to witness the delight they evince, and the good conduct they observe in inspecting the specimens. On last Easter Monday, nearly 5000 individuals visited the museum, and there was neither damage nor rude behaviour." I entertain no doubt that periodical exhibitions of arts and manufactures might be arranged so as to conduce to the immediate benefit of the Institutions, as well as to general industrial improvement.

A statement of the total number of members belonging to the Irish Institutions and Societies, with an analysis of the numbers belonging to different ranks and occupations, would be very interesting ; but I am not enabled to furnish it. The impression, however, (I only state it as such), which I have formed from the tenor of the various communications, is that the total number is made up from the various classes in about the following proportions:—

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| Shopkeepers, Their assistants, Clerks, | } | ·50, or half the total number. |
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|---|---|---------------------|
| Members of trades (i.e. carpenters, masons, &c.) and workmen or mechanics, | } | ·25, or one-fourth. |
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| | | |
|---------------------------------|---|--------------------|
| Professional men, Merchants, | } | ·20, or one fifth. |
|---------------------------------|---|--------------------|

Members of the higher class, ·05, or one twentieth.

Having requested the secretaries to inform me what they consider to be the chief impediments to the success of their several establishments, my attention has been drawn to the following points:—

1.—Much the greatest and most general stress has been laid upon the difficulty of procuring competent lecturers, possessed not only of adequate scientific attainments, but of the qualifications necessary to communicate knowledge in an interesting form to a popular audience. This difficulty arises partly from the limited number of lecturers so qualified, and still more from the scanty funds which can be commanded for defraying the expense.

2 and 3.—The want of efficient committees and officers, and the dearth of books, are the two next most frequent subjects of comment.

4, 5 and 6.—The absence of support and encouragement by the higher and wealthy classes; the deficiency of early education in the lower classes, to enable them to appreciate the advantages of the Institutions; and the want of provision in the establishments for occasional recreation, have next attracted remark in about an equal degree.

7 and 8.—Lastly, the closing of the reading-rooms on Sunday, when persons who are busy during the week could derive most benefit from them; and the obstacles to peaceful association created by religious animosity and party feeling.

It is remarkable that scarcely any allusion is made by my correspondents to the recent general distress, as having retarded the rise and progress of Literary Institutions; while a large proportion of the existing associations have been formed, as already stated, since 1847.

This brief statistical picture may be finished by the introduction of a ruinous back-ground, if I may so term a short account of four instances of complete failure of Mechanics' Institutes.

Of these instances, one occurred in the first commercial town in the north: and it would appear that it failed to attract the interest of the middle and lower classes, from an undue amount of that species of patronage, on the part of its promoters of the upper class, which consists not in unofficial liberality and support, but in intrusive management and superintendence.

A second failed, as I am informed, in consequence of the seizure by the secretary of the property belonging to it;* the committee being unable to obtain legal redress, in consequence of the Society being of course unregistered.

The cause of the disappearance of a third, I am briefly told by its late secretary, was the conduct of a defaulting treasurer; which completed the ruin of an Institution never in a healthy financial condition, in consequence of the apathy and illiberality of the wealthier classes.

With regard to the fourth, my correspondent writes: "The Mechanics' Institute is dead, and its place is supplied in a great degree by the well distributed schools of the Christian Brothers. The school of the Mechanics' Institute having been its most sustaining feature, when that was superseded, the Institute perished."

Having now submitted to the society as faithful a historical and statistical description of the Mechanics' and Literary Insti-

* See note, p. 16.

tutions of the United Kingdom, as my limits of time and means of information permitted, I shall endeavour to elicit some general conclusions; the detailed and practical application of which is, of course, out of my province, which, beyond the region of facts, extends no farther than suggestion. I shall premise that, although a survey of the condition of the Institutes and Societies of the three countries exhibits those of Ireland in, comparatively speaking, a very favorable aspect; yet as in Ireland too there have been failures, and there still are some symptoms of weakness if not of decay; and as, even if they were universally prosperous, their career has been too short to make it safe to disregard the results of a larger experience; reflections suggested by facts in the sister countries may have a practical application to the circumstances of this island.

Those results which a wider and larger experience presents are so uniform, that it is plain they arise from uniform causes; and that either to the operation or obstruction of social laws, or the principles of human nature as at present constituted, must be traced the decline and disappearance of so many Institutions, and the chronic infirmity of so many others. In fact, it appears that in England the rise of new associations and the fall of elder ones move in parallel lines. Now this wide and continuous diffusion is proof of a tendency to associate for certain purposes, while their brief existence seems to show, that the tendency is not to associate in the manner and for the precise objects for which the associations are at present constituted. The spontaneous rise of the plant is evidence that it springs from a congenial soil; but its sickly growth is a symptom of mistake or neglect in the mode of cultivation. But the purpose of this paper is rather to suggest the principles upon which a proper course of cultivation should be based, than to lay down special rules.

The voluntary development of so many associations evinces, as already observed, the tendency of certain classes of society to unite in certain forms; it is, in fact, the operation of a law of human nature; but the character and condition of those associations must be carefully examined before we can determine what the law is, and whether there are any disturbing forces deflecting it from its natural direction.

When the first Institutes were established for the operative classes, a law was tacitly assumed; for it was thought that those classes were under the influence of a tendency to co-operate so as to ensure their success. But this hypothesis was tested by experience, and was found to involve some misapprehension or miscalculation; since in fact they did not co-operate, and testified no inclination to co-operate generally in support of the particular kind of Institution, the abstract design of which filled the benevolent minds of the founders with exultation, at the prospect of making "the man a better mechanic, and the mechanic a better man." That they have failed to effect a considerable amount of good, and of this very kind, I should be sorry to assert; but the inspection of almost any Institution in

Great Britain will show three things:—first, that the class of persons who generally support them is not the class for which they were designed; secondly, that it has been found absolutely necessary to relax and alter the original plan, to meet the taste and wants of the section of the community which is willing to support them; and thirdly, that there still exist serious impediments to their complete success. With the first of these results I have not now to deal. As to the second, it may be said in general terms that the alteration consists in the extension of the objects of the associations to recreation as well as education. It has been the fashion to treat this as a very melancholy fact, to be contended against as much as possible; and in connection with this view, the chief impediment to the prosperity of properly constituted establishments is said by most writers to be the depraved taste of the public. For example, in one of Chambers' "Papers for the People" it is observed; "If the directors of any Institute were to come forward and say, 'henceforward this Institution is to be purely educational; we think it necessary that facilities for amusement should be provided, but that other places and people should provide them;' there would at once be formed organizations for supplying rational amusement under proper regulations, while the Institute would become a quiet orderly establishment for education. This is what it was intended to be, and this is what it must become. The result would probably be that the number of members would decrease, but the number of members is not always the measure of success. The great question is not, how many members pay, but how many are taught." In much the same tone, Dr. Hudson deplors the preference for lectures on "poetry, criticism and the drama," to "complete courses of sixty or ninety lectures on separate branches of physical science." Now really, in the first place, I cannot see anything deplorable in the taste of any class of society, whether mechanics or their superiors, for light literature, or even for "musical entertainments and dramatic readings." An unfavourable comparison has often been drawn between our continental brethren and our own countrymen, in consequence of what is called the "æsthetic taste" of the former for refined recreation of this very description; and surely it is very hard that the latter are reproached for want of taste because they do not recognize the æsthetic principle sufficiently, and at the same time for bad taste because they allow it too much weight.

It is common to deplore the greater amount of interest evinced in the literature of the news-room than in that of the library. For my own part, I attach no weight whatever to the objections entertained to the occupation of the leisure hours of men of business, in the study of "light, amusing, and ephemeral publications;" and it seems to me that the history of yesterday is fully as important to the working man of to-day, or to any man engaged in the practical affairs of life, as is the history of barbarous ages and departed empires. The education which fits men for the discharge of their actual duties, must be derived from a knowledge of the actions, manners and

occurrences of the world around them, and newspapers are the chief source from which such knowledge can be derived. But, in fact, Mechanics' and Literary Institutions may be said to have three distinct but not inconsistent objects, viz:—First, the advancement of science and the diffusion of general knowledge; second, the moral improvement of large and important classes of society; and, third, the increase of social happiness.

In the highest and most educated circles, provision is made for these distinct objects under the same roof; because, not only do the wants and tastes of different men vary, but the same men have various wants and tastes. It cannot be expected of any man to be a philosopher at all hours; still less can it be expected of a multitude of men. The whole principle of the objection I have stated, seems to me to involve a somewhat arrogant interference with the natural conditions and operations of social union, or a perfectly unphilosophical adhesion to an abstract conception or a name. If certain classes choose to combine their resources, for the purpose of providing at once more useful information and larger means of recreation than their separate efforts could accomplish; then, whether they have practised such good economy in mere instinctive obedience to propensities inherent in their nature, or from an intelligent appreciation of the principle called the division of labour, the *fact* of their co-operation cannot be ignored, because some individuals may think it would be better that they should co-operate for scientific and literary purposes exclusively; or that they are departing from the original plan of the Mechanics' Institute; or that the name 'Literary Society' is a misnomer for a society which meets for other besides strictly literary purposes.

The particular statistics which have been laid before you this evening may be made the basis of inductive investigation, either to afford a general indication of the degree and direction of social progress, or to suggest more specific conclusions as to the best means of promoting the prosperity of the institutions in question. But the train of reasoning in the two investigations is closely allied, only that the latter is pushed to a farther and more particular and immediate application; for it is only by ascertaining what is the demand of the public, that we can provide a suitable supply. Every practical suggestion for the benefit of these associations must relate to one of two questions: what kind of commodity is to be provided? and, what means should be taken to render it good of its kind? Now the kind of commodity to be provided is one which the public wants, and not one which it does not want; and the facts already adduced are sufficient indications of the kind which is wanted. What the staple attractions of an Institute are has been already stated; and if it is intended to do something more than "give to airy nothings a local habitation and a

name," the Mechanics' or Literary Institute must provide these attractions.

Having said so much as to the necessity of aiming, first and principally, at those objects which a wide experience has shown to be popular and successful; I now proceed to the class of considerations which relate to rendering the commodity good of its kind; or, in other words, pointing out the principal impediments to the practical attainment of the ends which those associations must keep in view. Upon impediments such as those commonly declaimed upon, viz., "the ignorance and apathy of the lower classes," the "deplorable want of early education," and the "baneful influence of political and religious animosity," it is not within my province to dwell. They are impediments unquestionably existing, but they arise from causes wide of the control of such special agencies as are appropriate for consideration in this paper. Attention, however, has latterly been drawn to obstacles of a more definite character. Thus, in a recent article of a periodical called *The Critic*, it is observed: "The causes of the decline and decay of Mechanics' Institutes (which, with their libraries, lectures, and news-rooms, are the chief sources from which a large portion of the population gets all its literature) lie too surely in what is the cause of all decline and decay in this world—bad management." This observation is explained by terming their committees and secretaries "conceited, fussy, and incompetent," and the lecturers "quacks;" and Dr. Hudson (to whose statements and opinions I have so often referred), is so alarmed at the mismanagement of the directors and other officers, that he looks forward to the time when private enterprise will supersede co-operation in the supply of the intellectual wants of the public. Now I do not venture to deny that private enterprise can and will be directed to provide for many of the objects aimed at in the existing institutions; it has done so in Glasgow, in the case of the "Argyle-street Mechanics' Institution;" but the fact that voluntary association has taken place, not only for the purpose of obtaining a common advantage, but also for the sake of joint operation, directly or indirectly, in providing it, is not to be overlooked. The luxuries supplied by the clubs of the rich could be more economically supplied by private enterprise; but those clubs exist, because private enterprise could not supply other wants and purposes for which they do exist. The superior economy of private enterprise is the result of a well understood law of human nature; but it is not, nor is the cohesive tendency of particular atoms, a more positive law or fact, than the tendency of the human atoms which compose the mass of society to agglomerate in such forms as Clubs and Mechanics' Institutes.

This reasoning, however, is certainly not meant to militate against the expediency of a revision and reform of the present mode of management. It is only used as introductory to the

suggestion, that the most feasible method of revisal, and consequently of reform, lies in the principle recognised by the "Provincial Union" system in England, already noticed; and expanded into more general application in the proposal of the Society of Arts in London, to form a national union in subordination to itself. This principle is thus expressed, in a resolution adopted at a conference of delegates from various institutions, held in London on the 18th of last month:—"That the success of Literary, Scientific, and Mechanics' Institutes, in the cultivation of literature, science, and art, and in the diffusion of knowledge, might be powerfully promoted by the combination of many institutions with the Society of Arts, on the basis of perfect independence of the local institutions, and freedom of self-management." In accordance with this resolution, the Society of Arts has made overtures to the various institutes and societies both in Great Britain and Ireland, to place themselves in connection with it, as a central association and depot of information and advice.

Now it appears to me that some such system of confederation would effect the most important advantages; chiefly through the agency of two principles to which I have already referred; the one consisting in the recognition of a social law, and the other in the application of an economic law. With respect to the first of these principles I may observe, that in devising the original scheme of Mechanics' Institutions, it was not possible the founders could be guided by what I may call the philosophy of facts. Two facts indeed they had in view; first, that some provision for adult education was a social want; and secondly, that society had arrived at a stage at which voluntary association might be directed to the supply of that want. But there were other social wants that were overlooked, and the real nature and tendency of the principle of association had never been tested. So, to use a homely illustration, the clothes did not fit, because the social man for whom they were intended was not measured before they were made. And when the unfitness became manifest, the makers adopted the plan described in the metaphor which Mr. Mill applies to designate our mode of legislative reform, that of "cutting a hole where the shoe pinches." The system proposed by the Society of Arts would supply the aid of the philosophy of facts, to develop the real character of the principle or law of association; and thus lead to a well digested plan of reform, in every point in which a wide experience would show the unfitness of the present constitution of the Institutions to the wants of the age. The prescribed limits of a single paper prevent me from saying more upon this point; but it may be mentioned here, that it has been urged upon me by an intelligent correspondent connected with a Mechanics' Institution in the north, that in place of the Society of Arts, a society in this metropolis should occupy a central relation towards a national union of Irish Institutions; and it has been suggested to me by a leading

member, to whose practical talent for organization, the existence and influential position of the Dublin Statistical Society are mainly attributable, that it might very appropriately be constituted the head of such an Irish national union. With this suggestion I warmly concur.

The economic law which would be brought into play by an efficient confederation, is thus expressed by political economists, that "the same exertions which are necessary to produce a single given result, are often sufficient to produce a multiplicity of similar results." It is upon this principle that the utility of all government depends, and it might easily be applied to the management of the Institutions here treated of. For example, a great many of the functions which devolve upon the separate officers of isolated societies, might be more efficiently discharged once for all in a central society. And the contributions of sums, which would be quite inadequate as separate funds for the employment of competent lecturers, might when consolidated secure the most valuable services. The reciprocal advantages which might arise from the interchange of books, manuscript lectures, papers, privileges, and information, rest on the same principle.

It seems unnecessary to carry farther an analysis of the beneficial results which would flow through one channel, by so extended and systematic a means of ascertaining the spirit and genius of the age, to which every social project to be successful must be accommodated; and, through another, by turning co-operation to its utmost economic account. One farther allusion to the economic principle may be made, as suggesting the consideration of a class of impediments which arise from the state of the law or the interference of government. In a speech recently delivered in the House of Commons, upon the "taxes on knowledge," Mr. Gladstone remarked, that the enhancement of the price of new books by those taxes had created the necessity for such contrivances as "book-clubs." Now it may be that an artificial necessity has been the parent of these inventions; but still, like Mechanics' Institutions, they are inventions made in the spirit of good economy, effecting by the exertion of a given amount of power, results of social instead of merely individual benefit. Not the less surely, however, are these taxes obstructions to the prosperity of Mechanics' Institutions and Literary Societies; not only because they aggravate their financial difficulties, but because they limit the diffusion of education, and impede the development of that intelligence which gives birth and vigor to these associations by creating and maintaining a demand for them.

Another legal obstruction arises from the complications and technicalities of the law of joint ownership. Literary Institutions should be enabled, by some such provisions as are contained in the Acts for the registration of joint-stock companies and friendly societies, to contract and enforce their contracts in the names of special officers. A particular instance of the want of simple and effectual corporate powers and functions, has been brought under my notice in an account of a Mechanics' Institute lately existing in a large and im-

portant town, where, as I am informed, the immediate cause of the extinction of the Institute was the absence of a practicable remedy against the seizure of the books and property belonging to it, by the officer to whose care they had been entrusted.*

In the same category may be classed the unwieldy system of conveyancing, and all the legal difficulties which render the transfer of property tedious and expensive. So much has been written by social inquirers upon the necessity of simplifying the mode of transferring property, that even a general allusion to the subject seems scarcely requisite. However, I may observe that the principle of the 13th and 14th Vic. c. xxviii, which is entitled "An act to render more simple and effectual the titles by which congregations or societies for purposes of religious worship or education hold property," should be extended to every description of property which may be held by Literary Institutions; so as to vest such property in the trustees successively appointed, without the necessity of cumbrous and expensive deeds.

Under the head of impediments occasioned by the Legislature or Government, should be included also, I am much inclined to think, the grant to the Government Schools of Design. It was before noticed, that drawing and designing classes have been among the most successful departments of education attempted in Mechanics' Institutions; but of late years the pupils have been drawn off by the Schools of Design, while the success of these schools has been insignificant, and obtained at an enormous cost. Steps might be taken to carry out the spirit of a recommendation contained in the report of the select committee of the House of Commons on Schools of Design, (1849) of which Sir R. Peel was a member: "Your committee approve of the steps which have been proposed for extending the operation of the Schools of Design, by bringing them into connexion with Mechanics' Institutions and other institutions where elementary drawing is taught." The general purpose as well as the prescribed limits of this paper, restrict me from attempting a detailed examination of the merits of this or any other suggestion; but I may add, that the uniform success which has attended periodical exhibitions of arts and manufactures by Mechanics' Institutions, both in Great Britain and America, indicates a practical mode of stimulating an interest in what I may call Institutional Schools of Design, and which would not only directly call forth the invention and energy of the draughtsman, but, by educating the national taste, react as a demand for progressive improvement on the part of the artist.

* Since this paper was read, the writer of it has received two communications from disinterested persons, stating that there were circumstances which justified the seizure by the officer, as a lien for a debt of long standing. But the state of the law should have enabled the trustees to try his right of seizure before a proper tribunal without much expense. And whatever may have been the circumstances of this particular case, the "legal obstruction" remains, and is calculated to create a want of confidence in the promoters of such institutions.

It is important to observe, that every direct impediment to the success of the Institutions we are considering, and every omission or neglected opportunity, operate as an obstacle not only to their prosperous growth, but even to their existence; whilst every obstruction removed, and every encouragement added, give life to new Institutions, as well as vigour to those already established.

It is but just, in criticising the acts and omissions of the legislature and government, to notice that an annual grant of £600, for the purpose of supplying the demand for scientific lecturers in the provincial towns of Ireland, has been placed under the administration of the Royal Dublin Society, and that important assistance has been given to local effort by this provision. It has been already stated that the general tenor of the communications from the secretaries of the Irish Institutes and Societies, shows that the difficulty of obtaining the services of competent lecturers is one of their greatest impediments. As applications from them are always favourably considered by the Royal Dublin Society, the grant is not only a national benefit but a special boon to such associations. They are also under a lasting obligation to the public spirit of the late Mr. John Barrington, of the City of Dublin. By his will, a fund was directed to be held in trust for the payment of lecturers in Political Economy, for the purpose of teaching the applications of that science, and explaining its practical relations to the conduct of life and the social duties of mankind. By the wisdom of the trustees of this fund, the selection of lecturers has hitherto been left to the council of the Dublin Statistical Society; and thus a very important addition has been made to its qualifications to occupy a central position in relation to the Mechanics' Institutions and Literary Associations of Ireland.

This mention of the establishment of the Barrington Lecturerships, leads naturally to an observation upon the privileges and duties of the aristocratic and wealthy classes of society. Few cases could be pointed out in which they could render a more important service to the community, than by a generous and judicious co-operation with the noble efforts of their social inferiors to support Literary Institutions. This is one of the forms which public spirit and munificence may take, without any danger of sapping the foundations of the spirit of independence in the character of the industrial classes; and with the certainty of drawing closer the bonds of social union, and promoting national morality, knowledge, power, wealth, and happiness. In England, the benevolence of the patrons of the earlier institutions was misdirected, inasmuch as they sought rather to control and govern than to assist. But keeping clear of undue interference, the liberality of the rich may find ample room for exercise in the legitimate department assigned to it. Mr. John Hill Burton, in his "Political and Social Economy," observes, in a chapter on the duties of wealth, "There are services which the richer classes owe to the rest of society, and which they only have education, leisure, and wealth to perform. The proper character

which such services should assume, is that they are to be done to the public and not to individuals." The example given by Mr. Burton is the donation of a park for the recreation of the inhabitants of a town; but the pertinence of his observation to the particular case of Mechanics' and Literary Institutions, is too obvious to justify an extension of this paper for the purpose of explaining its applicability.

The duties of wealth are beginning to be fully understood. The mischiefs occasioned by misdirected benevolence have led sociographers to map out the chart of public duty in clear lines and colors, which the wealthy cannot mistake. They have learned, too, that along with a more accurate circumscription of their line of duty, society has become more watchful that it is performed. And the statistics of Mechanics' and Literary Institutes not only supply materials for a history of the middle and lower classes who have thus associated for the advancement of knowledge and virtue; but, in the open court of public opinion, they will be read as evidence of the manner in which the superior members of society have filled their stewardship; and even the material interests of wealth and station may be involved in the verdict which this generation will find.